

ARE BUDDHISTS IDOL-WORSHIPPERS?

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Objects of Veneration



In every religion, there are certain objects or symbols for purposes of veneration. In Buddhism there are three main religious objects for this purpose:-

- *Saririka* or the bodily relics of the Buddha;
- *Uddesika* or religious symbols such as the Buddha image, *chetiya* or pagoda;
- *Paribhogika* or the personal articles used by the Buddha.

It is customary for Buddhists all over the world to pay homage to these objects of veneration. It is also a Buddhist tradition to erect Buddha images, *chetiya* or pagodas and plant a Bodhi tree in every temple to serve as religious objects of veneration.

Many people are under the impression that Buddhists pray to idols. This is due to a lack of knowledge of the teaching of the Buddha and Buddhist customs and traditions.

Idolatry generally means erecting images of certain gods and goddesses in various forms by devotees for prayers, for seeking blessings and protection, and for bestowing upon the supplicants health, wealth and prosperity, a practice found in some theistic religions. Some supplicants even plead with the image for the fulfilment of various personal favours even to the extent of committing nefarious deeds. They also seek forgiveness for sins committed.

The worship of the Buddha is quite a different aspect. Even this word “worship” is not quite appropriate from the Buddhist point of view. Paying homage should be the correct term. Buddhists do not normally pray to images and idols; what they do is to pay homage to a great religious teacher who is worthy of honour. The images are erected as a mark of respect and appreciation for the highest achievement of enlightenment and perfection by an extraordinary religious teacher. To a Buddhist the image is merely a token, a symbol, a representation which helps him to recall or to remember the Buddha.

Buddhists kneel before the image and pay their respect to what that image represents. They do not seek worldly favours from the image. They reflect and meditate to gain inspiration from his noble personality.

They try to emulate his perfection by following his noble teachings.

Buddhists respect the great virtues and sanctity of a religious teacher as represented by the image. In fact the followers of every religion create the images of their respective religious teachers either in visual form or in the form of a mental image for veneration; hence it is not quite correct nor justifiable to criticize Buddhists as idol worshippers.

This act of paying homage to the Buddha, is not an act based on fear or an act to supplicate for worldly gain. Buddhists believe that it is a meritorious act and a blessing if they honour and respect the great virtues of their respectable mentor. Buddhists also believe that they are responsible for their own salvation and that they should not depend on a third party. However there are others who believe that they can gain their salvation through the influence of an image and these are the very people who create such impression for others to pass caustic remarks inferring that Buddhists are idolaters and are praying to the image of a man who is long dead and gone. A person's physical body may disintegrate and dissolve into the four elements but his great virtues remain forever. Buddhists appreciate and respect those virtues. Therefore, the allegation against the Buddhists is very unfortunate, entirely wrong and uncalled for.

From the teachings, we know that Buddha was a teacher who has shown the correct path for salvation but it was up to the followers to lead a religious life and purify

their minds in order to attain that state, without depending on their religious teacher. According to the Buddha, there is no God or any other religious teacher who can send people either to heaven or hell. Man creates his own heaven and hell through his own thoughts, words and actions. Therefore praying to a third party for salvation without removing the evil thoughts from the mind is of not much use. Nevertheless there are people, even amongst Buddhists, who whilst performing their traditional prayers in front of the images, would pour forth their troubles, misfortunes and difficulties begging the Buddha to help them sort out their problems.

Although not a real Buddhist practice, such devotional acts do achieve some form of emotional relief and inspiration to the supplicants enabling them to gain courage and resolution to solve their difficulties. This is also a common practice in many other religions. But for those who can understand the basic cause of their problems, they need not resort to such practices. When Buddhists pay respects to the Buddha, they honour him by reciting some verses that expound his pristine virtues. These verses are not prayers in the sense of asking a God or a deity to wash away their sins. The verses are simply a means of paying homage to a great teacher who had gained enlightenment and emancipated mankind to a specific way of life for the good of all humanity. Buddhists honour their religious teacher out of gratitude whilst others pray and make pleadings for their benefit and gain. Buddha has also advised us to 'honour

those who are worthy of honour'. Therefore, Buddhists can pay respect to and honour any religious teacher worthy of honour.

In place of prayers, Buddhists practise meditation for mind-training and self-discipline. For purposes of meditation, an object is necessary; without which it may not be easy to concentrate. Buddhists sometimes use the image or picture of the Buddha as an object on which they can concentrate to train their mind.

Amongst the objects of meditations, visual objects have a better impact on the mind. Amongst the five senses, the object grasped through eye-consciousness has a greater influence over the mind than the objects grasped through any of the other senses. Therefore the object grasped through the eye organ helps the mind to achieve better and easier concentration.

Images are the language of the subconscious. If therefore, the image of the Enlightened One is reflected within one's mind as the embodiment of a perfect man, such reflection will penetrate into one's sub-conscious mind and if sufficiently strong, will act as an automatic brake against evil impulses.

The Buddha image as a visual object has a beneficial impact on the mind: the recollection of the achievements of the Buddha produces joy, invigorates the mind and uplifts man from a state of restlessness, tension, and frustration.

One of the intentions of "*Buddha-nussati*" meditation on the Buddha is to create a feeling of

devotion and confidence in the Buddha by realizing and appreciating his greatness. Therefore, the worship of the Buddha image is for concentration and should not be treated as idol worship but as an ideal form of worship.

Salutations

Some of the verses that Buddhists recite to remember their great teacher as a mark of respect in gratitude and in praise of the Buddha, are as follows:—

“Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-sambuddhassa – Honour to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the fully Enlightened One.”

Further they recite some verses that explains the great qualities and virtues of the Buddha, such as:—

*“Iti pi so Bhagava Araham Samma sambuddho
vijja carana-sampanno
Sugato Lokavidu Anuttaro Purisa damma-sarathi
Sattha Deva manussanam Buddho Bhagava ti”*

These recitals are in the Pali language. If you are not familiar with this language, you can recite the verses in any language you understand. The English translation is as follows:—

“Such indeed is the Blessed One, Exalted, All-Knowing, endowed with knowledge and virtue. Well-gone, knower of the worlds. A Guide incomparable for the training of individuals. Teacher of gods and men, Enlightened and Holy.”

A Buddhist Story

Here is a story that will help us to understand why the Buddha image is important to inspire and to recall the Buddha into our mind. This story is found in the Buddhist literature, but not that of the Pali Tipitaka.

A few hundred years after the passing away of Buddha, there was a devout monk in India named Upagupta. He was the most popular preacher at that time. Whenever he gave a sermon on the Dhamma, thousands of people would flock to listen to his preaching.

One day, Mara, the tempter, became jealous of Venerable Upagupta's popularity. Mara knew that Upagupta's popularity was helping to spread the teachings of the Buddha. He was not happy to see the words of the Buddha filling the minds and hearts of the people. So he used a cunning method to influence the people. He made a plan to stop the people from listening to Upagupta's sermons. One day, as Upagupta began his sermon, Mara organized a drama next to the place where Upagupta preached. A beautiful stage-show suddenly appeared. There were pretty dancing girls and lively musicians.

The people soon forgot about the sermon and crossed over to the show to enjoy the performances. Upagupta watched the people slowly drift away. Then he also decided to join the crowd. After that he decided to teach Mara a lesson.

When the performance ended, Upagupta presented Mara with a garland of flowers.

“You have organized a wonderful performance,” said Ven. Upagupta.

Mara, of course, was happy and proud of his achievement. He gladly accepted the garland from Upagupta and held his head high in the air.

Suddenly it happened: the garland changed into a snake-like coil. Slowly the coil tightened until it choked his neck. So painful was that coil gripping his neck, that he tried to pull the coil off. No matter how hard he pulled, he could not take the coil off his neck. He decided to ask help from Sakka, the King of the gods to remove the coil. Sakka also could not remove it. “I cannot remove this coil,” said Sakka, “Go and see Maha Brahma, who is the most powerful one.

So Mara went to see Maha Brahma and asked his help; but Maha Brahma also could not do anything. “I cannot remove this coil, the only one who can remove this coil is the person who put it on you.” said Maha Brahma.

So Mara had to come back to Venerable Upagupta.

“Please remove this coil; it is so painful,” he begged.

“Yes, I can do that only under two conditions,” said Upagupta. “The first condition is that you must promise not to disturb Buddhist devotees any more in the future. The second condition is that you must show me the real image of Buddha. Because I know that you have seen him on many occasions, but I have never seen him. I would like to see the real Buddha image exactly like him, with the special thirty-two characteristics of his physical

body”.

Mara was so happy. He agreed with Upagupta. “But one thing” pleaded Mara, “If I change myself into the image of the Buddha, you must promise that you will not worship me, because I am not a holy person, like you”.

“I will not worship you”, promised Upagupta.

Suddenly Mara transformed himself into an image that looked exactly like the Buddha. When Upagupta saw the image, his heart was filled with great inspiration; a deep devotion arose in his heart. With folded hands, he at once worshipped the Buddha figure.

“You are breaking your promise,” shouted Mara, “you promised you would not worship me. Now why do you worship me?”

“I am not worshipping you. You must understand I am worshipping the Buddha” said Venerable Upagupta.

From this story we can understand why the Buddha image is important to inspire us and to help us to recall the sublime Buddha into our mind so that we can venerate him. We Buddhists do not worship the material symbol or forms that only represent the Buddha. We pay our respects to the Buddha.

Inspirations from Buddha Image

The Buddha has passed away into *Maha Parinibbana*. He does not need worship and offerings, yet the result of worship will follow and people will benefit by following his example and reflecting over his highest sacrifice and

greatest qualities.

A Buddhist does not offer animal sacrifices in the name of the Buddha.

When some Buddhists see the image of the Buddha, devotion and happiness appear in their mind. This devotion or happiness creates meritorious thoughts in the minds of devout Buddhists. The Buddha image also helps people to forget their worries, frustrations and problems and helps them to have some control over their mind.

Certain world famous philosophers, historians and scholars used to keep the Buddha image on a table in their reading rooms in order to get inspiration for a higher life and thought. Many of them are non-Buddhists. Many people honour their departed parents, teachers, great heroes, kings and queens, national and political leaders and other beloved persons by keeping their photographs to cherish their memories. They place flowers to express their feelings of love, gratitude, reverence, appreciation and devotion. They recall their great qualities and remember with pride the sacrifices and services rendered by them while they were alive.

People also erect statues in memory of certain political leaders who have massacred millions of innocent people. Through their cruelty and greed for gaining power they invaded poor countries and created untold sufferings, atrocities and miseries by their plundering hordes. Yet they are being regarded as great heroes; and memorial services are conducted in honour

of them, and flowers offered on their graves and tombs. If such practices can be justified, why should some people ridicule followers of the Buddha as idol worshippers when they pay respect to their religious teacher who has served mankind without harming others and who has conquered the whole world through his love, compassion and wisdom.

Can anyone in their right senses say that this act of paying homage to the Buddha image is an uncultured, immoral or harmful act likely to disturb the peace and happiness of the people?

If an image is not important at all for a man to practise a religion then certain religious symbols and places of worship are also not necessary. Buddhists are ridiculed by some people as stone worshippers. But even if such a bigoted statement was true, worshipping stones is harmless and more respectable than throwing stones at the followers of other religions.

The Importance of Practice

To practise the teachings of the Buddha, it is not compulsory for a person to pay homage to a Buddha image. Buddhists can practise their religion without the image of the Buddha; they can do this because Buddha did not encourage people to depend on any personality. According to the teachings of the Buddha, Buddhists should not depend on others, not even on the Buddha himself – for their salvation.

During the Buddha's time, there was a monk named

Wakkali. This monk always used to sit in front of the Buddha and admire the beauty of the physical features of the Buddha. He said that he derived enormous happiness and inspiration by admiring the beauty of the Buddha. The Buddha replied that “You cannot see the real Buddha by watching the physical body. The one who sees my teaching sees me.”

The most important aspect in Buddhism is to put into practice the advice given by the Buddha. In this respect, it makes no difference whether Buddhists pay homage to the Buddha or not. But to many devotees it is an important act. However, the Buddha did not say that He was waiting for salutations.

Origin of the Buddha Image

Then, how did the Buddha image originate? It is difficult to find out whether this idea was given by the Buddha or not. Nowhere in the Buddhist scriptures does the Buddha request that an image of himself be made. However, the Buddha did give permission to preserve his relics.

The Venerable Ananda once wanted to know if it was permissible to erect a pagoda (*chetiya*) in memory of the Buddha as a way of paying respect to him. So Venerable Ananda asked the Buddha, “Is it proper, Lord, to construct a pagoda while you are still alive?”

The Buddha’s reply was: “No, it is not proper while I am still alive. You can erect this object of reverence only after my passing away.”

Also in his last sermon, the *Maha Parinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha advised his disciples that if they wished to pay respects to the Buddha after He passed away, they could erect pagodas to enshrine the bodily relics. This advice was in keeping with the custom of that time in India: the custom was to erect pagodas to keep the relics of holy people. The relics were kept as a remembrance out of respect for the holy man. At the same time, the Buddha himself neither discouraged nor encouraged his disciples to create an image of himself after his passing away. The idea to create a Buddha image came from his followers who wanted to revere their beloved leader and gain religious inspiration from such a serene personality. They also used to enshrine some relics of the Buddha when images were being erected.

Fa-hsien, who visited India at the end of the fourth century mentioned in his record how the first Buddha image was erected. However, the Buddhist scriptures are silent on Fa-hsien's observations. Nevertheless, the mythology recorded was as follows:

Once the Buddha spent three months in heaven preaching the *Abhidhamma* or higher doctrine. During his absence, the people who went to the temple were very unhappy because they could not see the Buddha. They began to complain. Venerable Sariputta, the Chief disciple, went to see him and reported the situation to the Buddha. The Buddha advised him to find a person who can create an image that looked exactly like him; then the people would be happy to see the image of the

Buddha. Sariputta returned and approached the king to ask his favour to find the person who could create a replica of the Buddha. Soon a man was found; he carved the image out of sandal wood. After the image was placed in the temple, the people became very happy. From this time onwards, according to Fa-hsien, people started copying this replica of the Buddha.

But it is difficult to find evidence in Buddhist literature and history to support the existence of Buddha images in India until nearly 500 years after the Buddha's passing away. At that time, the devotees used to pay their respects to the Buddha by keeping either a lotus flower or only the picture of the feet of the Buddha. It would appear that at the beginning some Buddhists were also not in favour of erecting the image of the Buddha, since it was quite possible that the salient features of the Buddha might be distorted.

Many historians claimed that the Buddha image was first erected in India during the period of Greek occupation. The Greeks helped and encouraged the Indian people in the art of erecting the images of the Buddha. Since that time, people in many countries began erecting images. The images in the various countries were sculptured according to the style and artistic expression embodying the physical features of the people in the particular country. Within each Buddhist country, the style of the Buddha image also evolved into different forms and styles conforming to the different periods of its history.

What Intellectuals say about the Buddha Image

Pandit Nehru, former Prime Minister of India, remarked about the Buddha image:

“His eyes are closed, but some power of the spirit looks out of them and a vital energy fills the frame. The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away after all; his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement”. He also has said. “When I was in jail, I used to think of this statue, and it was a source of tremendous inspiration to me.”

During the second world war, General Ian Hamilton found an image of the Buddha in the ruins of a temple in Burma. He sent this image to Winston Churchill, who was then the Prime Minister of Great Britain, with the message:

“When you are worried, just look at this reposeful attitude and smile at your worries.”

Count Keyserling, a German philosopher, said:

“I know nothing more grand in this world than the figure of the Buddha; it is an absolutely perfect embodiment of spirituality in the visible domain.”

Another scholar said:-

“The images we see of the Buddha are symbolic representations of qualities. The homage and respect paid to the Buddha is but a symbolic veneration of his greatness and the happiness we find in his teaching.”

The calm and serene image of the Buddha has been a common concept of ideal beauty. The Buddha's image is the most precious, common asset of Asian cultures. Without the image of the Buddha, Asia would become nothing more than a geographical expression, however prosperous she may be.

Buddhists respect the Buddha statue as a monument of the greatest, wisest, most perfect and compassionate religious teacher who ever lived in this world. The image is necessary to recall the Buddha and his great qualities which inspired millions of people from generation to generation throughout the civilized world. It helps them to concentrate on the Buddha. They feel in their minds the living presence of the master so that their act of worship may be vivid and significant.

As a Buddhist, it would be most appropriate for you to have either a Buddha image or a picture of the Buddha in your home. Keep this image or picture not as an ornamental showpiece but as an object of admiration, inspiration and veneration. The serene figure of the Buddha, an emblem radiating loving-kindness, purity and perfection, serves as a source of consolation and inspiration in helping you to overcome whatever difficulties, worries, that you may have to face in your day-to-day activities in this troubled world. When you venerate the Buddha, you will be greatly rewarded if you meditate for a short while by focussing your mind on the great and noble qualities of the Buddha; if you think of the Great Teacher you can perfect yourself through his

guidance. It is therefore, not unnatural that this respect should express itself in some of the *finest and most beautiful art* and sculpture the world has ever seen.

Another well-known writer said in his philosophical language on the real meaning of paying homage to the Buddha, as follows:—

“We too need the act of homage though its adoration is directed, not to a person – for in truth all personality is a dream – but to our hearts’ ideal. Thus may we ever find fresh strength and build a shrine of our own lives, cleansing our hearts till they are worthy to bear the image in an innermost sanctuary of love. Upon that altar all of us need to offer gifts not of dying lights, fading flowers and fleeting, but of deeds of love, of sacrifice, and selflessness towards those about us”.

Anatole France, in his autobiography writes, “On the first of May 1890, chance led me to visit a museum in Paris. There, standing in the silence and simplicity of the gods of Asia, my eyes fell on the statue of the Buddha who beckoned to suffering humanity to develop understanding and compassion. If ever a god walked on this earth, I felt here was he. I felt like kneeling down to him and praying to him as to a God.”

Mr. Ouspensky, another western philosopher expressed his feelings about a Buddha image that he found in Sri Lanka. He said: “This Buddha is quite an exceptional piece of art. I do not know of any other work of art which stands on the same level as the Buddha with the sapphire eyes that is to say I know of no work which

expresses in itself so completely the idea of religion as the face of this Buddha expresses the idea of Buddhism. To understand this face is to understand Buddhism.” Further he said:– “There is no need to read large volumes of Buddhism, or to walk with professors who study Eastern religions or with learned Bhikkhus. One must come here, stand before the Buddha let the gaze on those blue eyes penetrate one’s life, and one will understand what Buddhism is”.

The beautiful Buddhist art of erecting images and creating wall paintings of various Buddhist stories have tremendously inspired to enrich art and culture of almost every Asian country for more than 2000 years.

What is it that makes the message of the Buddha so attractive to people who have cultivated their intellect? Perhaps the answer can be seen in the serenity of the image of the Buddha. Not only in colour and line did men express their faith in the Buddha and the graciousness of his teachings. Human hands wrought in metal and stone produce the Buddha image that is one of the greatest creations of the human genius.

If Buddhists truly wish to behold the Buddha in all the majestic splendour and beauty of his ideal presence, they must translate his teachings into practical situations and actions in their daily lives. It is in the practice of his teachings that they can draw close to him and feel the wonderful radiance of his undying wisdom and compassion. Simply respecting the images without following his sublime teaching is not the way to find

salvation.

A life so beautiful, a heart so pure and kind, a mind so deep and enlightened, a personality so inspiring and selfless – such a perfect life, such a compassionate heart, such a calm mind, such a serene personality is really worthy of respect, worthy of honour and worthy of offering. The Buddha is the highest perfection of mankind and the flower of humanity.

Sir Edwin Arnold explains the nature of Buddhahood in his *“Light of Asia”*, in this way:

“This is the blossom on our human tree which
opens in many a myriad years
But opened, fills the world with wisdom’s scent
And love’s dropped honey.”

